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Fenn, Elizabeth Anne *Pox Americana: The Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* Hill and Wang, 2002 978-0809078219 Soft Cover

As I have thought about the American Revolutionary War, I never had any images of disease and destruction of smallpox. When I have imagined the Civil War, death from disease had more of an impact on me. I knew the impact of disease on the westward movement and the Trail of Tears Indian relocation disaster of Jackson. They were vividly represented in my mind. Images in my mind of the Revolutionary war had visions of the soldiers at Valley Forge dying of flu and exposure and not of Small Pox. Of all our readings, this book has had the most dramatic impact on my understanding of the war. When I picked up the book, I just couldn't put it down.

I was surprised by the effect of the small pox epidemic on every segment of the continental United States. This book was geographical history of the disease in all parts of the land. It gives a historical presentation of what was going on in the continental United States while the Revolutionary War was being fought. While different historical perspectives of each segment of the land, the pox brought devastation to all. There was tragedy brought to the indian tribes, there were long distance travel by horse and buggy through unpaved wilderness. There was explorers and fur traders and pioneers expanding as early as the Revolutionary War. These people brought small pox with them to the new lands and native Americans.

Fenn gives a morbidly detailed account of how such illnesses changed the outcome of the world. The author gives a detailed account of the spread and lethal impact such disease has on a society. When an outbreak would occur, people would evacuate the area. Many times this would leave small children to take care of the dying parents. People would not feed or care for them. This would leave the family to all die from such close quarters.

Some places like Boston had Pesthouses where the affected individuals would go and live. If you went to such house, it meant sure death for such patients. Paul Revere's infant daughter contracted the disease. They were not going to put their daughter into a Pest house. They took care of her. The whole family was isolated for months and could not leave their house. They put a soldier by the house to insure that no one left the house. The daughter did not die; nor did any other of the other family members contracted the disease. They closed down Paul Revere's silver shop and would not allow any orders to be filled. This caused financial disaster on the family. I would have probably passed over this story, if it had not been the influence of reading Fenn's book. The disease took on a new meaning to me.

Politically, it was interesting to read that men were selected for political office based on whether they were immune from the disease. John Adams was selected to serve in the Congress because he had been inoculated as a youth. Adams went through the trying "inoculation" process in his youth, in which people were given smallpox in hopes that by contracting it under controlled conditions they'd be more likely to survive without too much permanent damage. This was not the same thing as modern inoculations with weakened or killed viruses; it was a direct infection with the active virus. For some reason, most people inoculated this way did get a less severe form of the disease than if they'd contracted it normally, but it was definitely not a fine-tuned, well-controlled process, and many people got seriously ill or even died from the

inoculations. But the survivors were immune after that, something invaluable as the epidemic spread - and the war raged on.

George Washington had the dilemma of whether to inoculate the soldiers. I really would never thought of such important decisions by the leaders, Small pox had a strong impact on the politics of the struggling country. George Washington decided on quarantine instead of inoculation. This did not work. George Washington may have made the wrong decision. Fenn convinces me that there were more deaths by the disease than by the devastations of gunshot or gun powder. Many times the militaristic images overpower the scenes of death by disease.

I had never heard the story about the Blacks small pox while fighting for the British. I had never heard about the offers by many British Army officers to grant freedom to any slaves who would leave their masters and fight for the Crown. Many slaves accepted the offer, only to find that once the battles were over their new friends simply left them behind - in camps where smallpox was raging. There's a quote from Thomas Jefferson in which he estimated that of 30,000 Virginia slaves who had, he believed, joined the British, almost 27,000 died "of smallpox and camp-fever". While most of the British soldiers were immune from the disease, their side was also affected.

Fenn points out that especially deadly and specialized, *Variola* suffers from its own success. The disease either kills or affords immunity, rendering victims unsuitable for the virus to linger in or to return to. Elizabeth Fenn observes that "for the parasite this presents a problem. *Variola* consumes its human hosts as a fire consumes its fuel, leaving spent bodies, dead or immune, behind it. Possessing no carriers or victims other than humans, the virus needs to find new hosts quickly. It thrived in places crowded with people, and benefited from diseased (but not yet symptomatic) travelers visiting new and unaffected communities. Moreover, *Variola*

was deadliest where social chaos prevailed. Bad enough in the best of circumstances, smallpox fatality soared when people lacked nurturing care. Indians died in especially large numbers because almost everyone in a village became sick at the same time, leaving too few to provide food, water, firewood, and care to the afflicted. Malnourished, dehydrated, cold, and demoralized groups rarely survived the virus. War maximized the crowding, the movement, and the disruption that promoted smallpox. Wars cluster people in filthy military cantonments and refugee camps, and send soldiers marching and civilians fleeing.” These passages give me the scare and vision of how it ravaged the colonial world.

This book has had a strong impact on me and I am grateful for having been able to read it.